

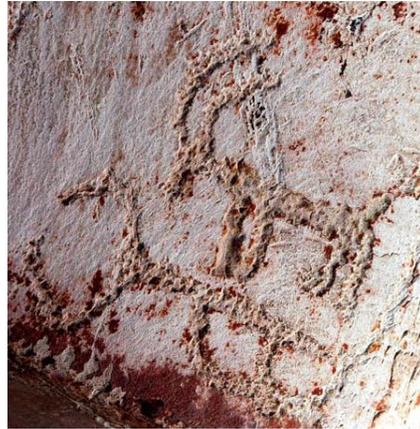
The Rock Art of Utah

What Is Rock Art?

There are several methods of making rock art, but painting and pecking are the two most common. If you understand these two types of rock art you will recognize the vast majority of rock art.



A pictograph, or painted, rock art figure



A petroglyph, or pecked, rock art figure

Most rock art in Utah is pecked. But there is a lot of painted rock art as well. Utah is rich in archeology. Utah has 96,000 documented archeological sites which vary from large habitation sites to places where ancient people made stone tools and left flakes on the ground. Of these 96,000 sites about 4,200 sites are rock art. 80% of these sites are petroglyphs (pecked) sites. 32% of sites are pictographs (painted). Those numbers add up to more than 100% because about 12% of sites are both painted and pecked.¹ These numbers are even more impressive when you realize that only about 10% of the State has been surveyed.

Much rock art is representational, meaning it looks like something that we can understand from the real world. In the pictograph above we see things that look like a snake, a human figure, plants, and some kind of animal. In the petroglyph we see figures that look like animals. All of these are representational. How to interpret these representational figures is much more difficult. Is the human figure the image of a living person, an alien, the spirit of a deceased leader, a God, the physical representation of a constellation, or a fictional figure from a story? Representational figures look like they are easy to understand, but accurate interpretation, without the cultural knowledge of those who created the figures, is fraught with peril.

Consider the “swoosh.” We look at that abstract symbol and immediately see the Nike logo. Some will also hear the words: “Just do it.” Perhaps you also get a general sense of athleticism or even female empowerment. We get all that because of our cultural affiliation with this symbol. Someone who lives in a country without Nike products might not understand any of these concepts. Certainly someone from the 1950s wouldn’t get any of these concepts from looking at the graphic. They might interpret the “swoosh” as an abstract check mark or, perhaps, a toboggan.



Not all rock art is representational. Some is also abstract. In fact, there are a few styles which are only abstract. The rock art site in the photo below contains some representational figures, but is mostly abstract figures: spirals, long straight lines, curvy lines that don’t seem to create any clear meaning. Is it a map, something a shaman saw in a trance, or a scene that had meaning to the creator but isn’t obvious to us?



What Does Rock Art Mean?

Not everyone will agree with us, but we don't believe rock art is writing. Writing systems require a consistent format. For example in our alphabetical system "deer" means something very different than "reed". Our form of writing, and reading, requires a consistent left to right process. Even in graphical based writing where images stand for words, or concepts, there needs to be an order to those images to create a consistent interpretation of their meaning.

If you've been to a rock art site you know there aren't ordered lines of images. Rock art sites are chaotic, with images all over the place.

That said, we believe that rock art sites have meaning. One of our favorite descriptions of the purpose of rock art sites is from a Paiute elderⁱⁱ who talked about visiting the "learning rocks." We believe that rock art sites tell stories. There may still be representatives of the cultures who created the sites who can interpret those stories.

Different rock art sites probably served different purposes: from storytelling to trail markers, boundary markers, calendar sites, ceremonial locations, invocations for rain, harvest, or hunting, maps, records of events, counting of groups that have passed by, honoring important people, figures of deities or astronomical figures, and perhaps even just decoration.



Newspaper Rock State Park is a typical rock art site with a confusing jumble of figures.

Who Lived In the Utah Area?

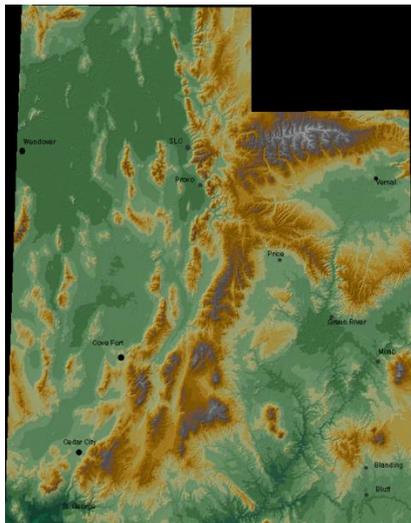
Group	Timeframe
Paleo-Indians	12,000 BC – 8,000 BC
Archaic Barrier Canyon Glen Canyon Desert Archaic	8,000 BC – 500 AD
Anasazi Basketmaker Puebloan	500 BC – 800 AD 800 AD – 1,300 AD
Fremont	200 AD – 1,300 AD
Numic Speaking – Ute, Paiute, Shoshone	1,200 AD - Present
Navajo	1,700 AD - Present

Utah has had a broad diversity of people living here from the Paleolithic to current times. This chart identifies these people and the approximate time frames for their presence in Utah.

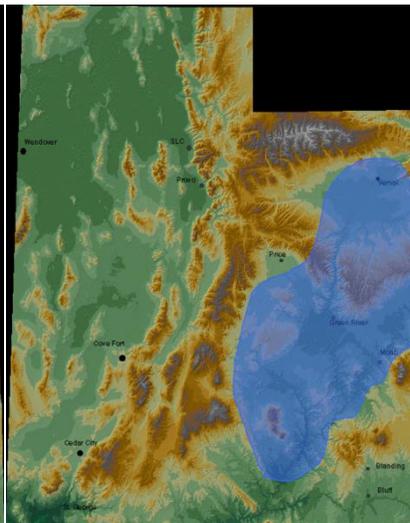
There is a debate on whether Paleo-Indians created rock art in Utah. A small number of rock art sites in Utah have been proposed as originating from this time period. It is clear that all of the other Native American groups in the table have rock art in Utah.

Each of these groups had particular styles that typify their rock art. Defining styles with precision is difficult. Styles change over time, across geographies, and are based on the whims and skills of individual artists. Consider how Western art has changed in the last 700 years. We've gone from the start of the Renaissance to Cubism. In contrast, Archaic groups occupied Utah for almost 10 times that amount of time.

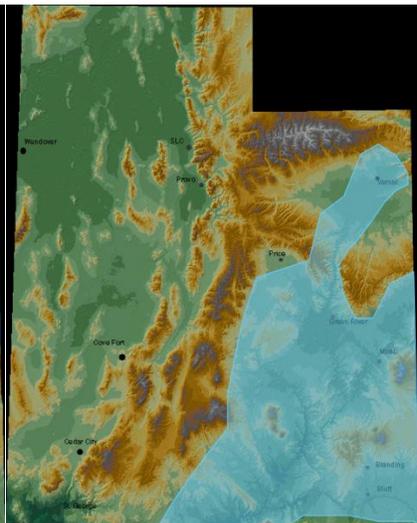
The following maps show rough boundaries for where these cultures lived. Please take the borders with a grain of salt. Cartography isn't our strong suit.



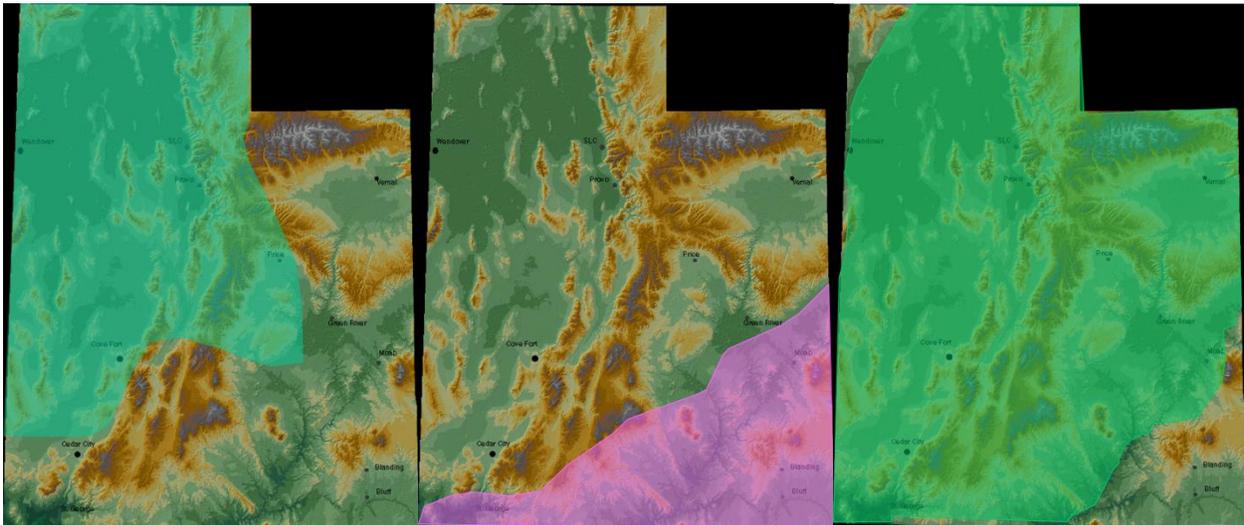
Archeological evidence of Paleo-Indians has been found throughout the state.



The Barrier Canyon culture concentrates in the San Rafael Swell, Moab, Needles District, and Hanksville areas.



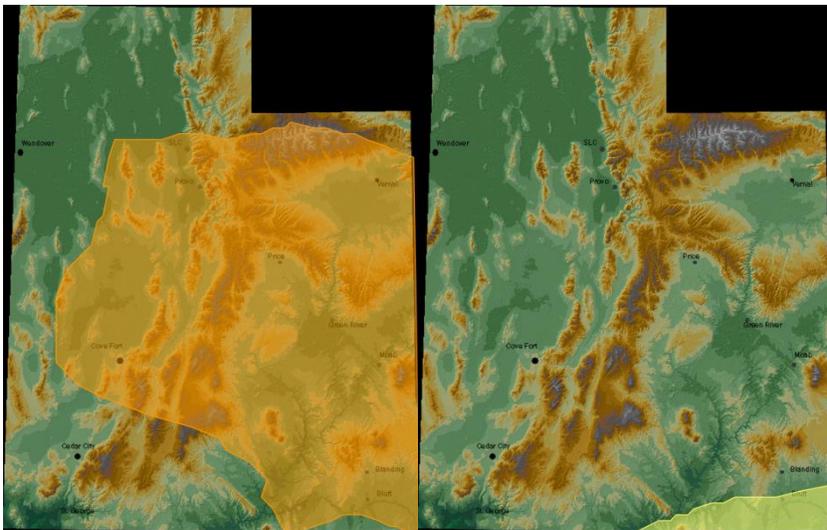
Glen Canyon culture was centered around what is now Lake Powell.



The Desert Archaic culture is primarily found west of the Wasatch Front.

A rough rule of thumb for Anasazi culture is that it did not extend north of the Colorado River.

The Fremont lived throughout much of the state. As a general rule, the Fremont stayed north of Anasazi areas.



The Ute lived throughout much of the state. The Paiute tended to be in the southern and western areas.

The Navajo culture exists in the southeastern corner of Utah.

Rock Art Styles

Rock art styles vary over time and across geographies. Fremont rock art in Vernal looks different than rock art at Fremont Indian State Park near Richfield. Rather than describe all of the intricacies with styles we will identify the prototypical style and, if it is geographically important, we will note where that stylistic pattern is located.

We'll try to provide you with a list of characteristics for the major rock art styles in Utah. But you won't have any trouble finding a rock art site that clearly belongs to a particular style but doesn't have every feature listed. We will focus on the style of anthropomorphic (human looking) figures because they are common in rock art and will simplify the process.

Barrier Canyon Style Rock Art

The “type site” for Barrier Canyon rock art is the Great Gallery in Horseshoe Canyon. A “type site” is the site which defined the style. Horseshoe Canyon used to be known as Barrier Canyon until an oil and gas exploration crew built a road across it and it was a barrier no more.

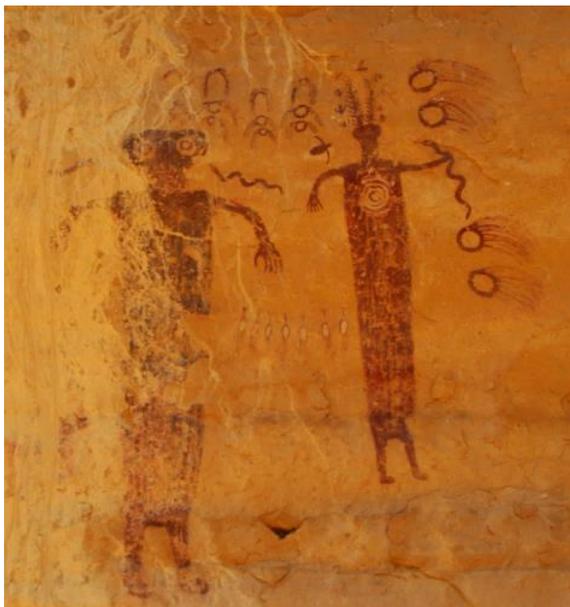
The Barrier Canyon Style is a good place to start because it has been extensively studied by David Sucec of the [Barrier Canyon Style Project](#). David notes the following characteristics of the style:ⁱⁱⁱ

- Elongated figure proportion, width to length, most often tapered, most often without limbs
- Spirit Figures are bilaterally symmetrical
- The parallel line motif with long vertical lines rather than the typically horizontal orientation (rake) of other Archaic styles
- Arcs over the head/shoulders
- Headdresses such as “crowns” and double antennae
- Round, oversized/vacant/goggle eyes
- Shoulder bar
- Compositions apparently representing friendly associations of animal, bird, snake and plant images with anthropomorphic spirit figures.
- Composite figures, or hybrids, made up of body parts of different species
- Quadrupeds (dogs, cougar?) with tails curved over its back
- Fletched or un-fletched spears (long poles)

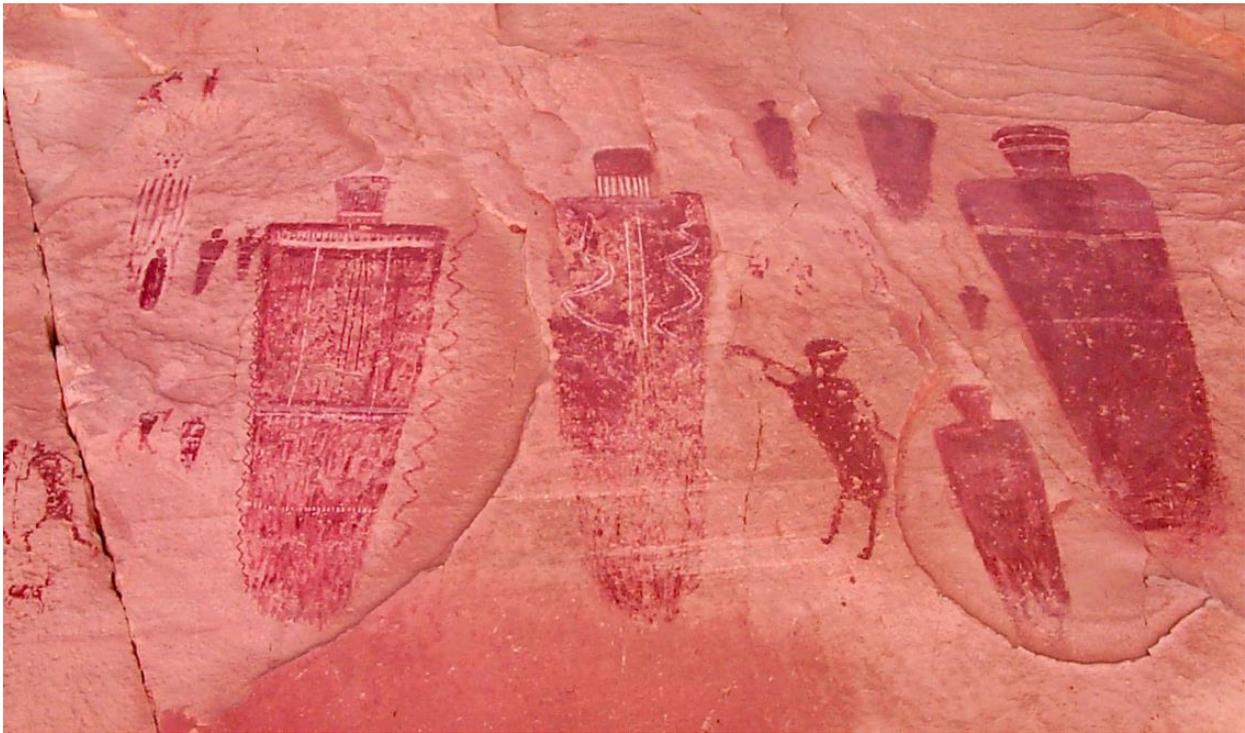
A Note About Names

Throughout this document we are using the names commonly associated with these cultures. Names are controversial. With the exception of the terms Ute and Paiute which are anglicized versions of real tribal names, names in this document are incorrect. The Navajo prefer the term Diné but also refer to themselves as Navajo. The Fremont, Barrier Canyon, Desert Archaic, and Glen Canyon cultures derive their names from their geographical type sites. We don't know their language or how they referred to themselves. Anasazi is a Navajo term meaning either “ancient ones” or “ancient enemy”. Modern Puebloan tribes speak six different languages, so it is difficult to assign a name to these ancestors of the modern Puebloan people.

We believe David has missed one important characteristic of the style. In our experience it is the only Utah style which is anthropocentric (with the possible exception of Anasazi Basketmaker). We believe all Barrier Canyon Style rock art is focused on the anthropomorphs (human looking figures). Other styles will have a panel that is abstract, or just about animals. But in Barrier Canyon Style rock art the anthropomorphs always seem to be the largest and most centrally located figures.



These Barrier Canyon Style figures demonstrate the typical elongated body associated with Barrier Canyon Style but have arms and legs. Note the large “alien” style eyes on the left figure. Both figures are associated with snakes. Note the incredibly small birds flying around the plant style headdress of the right figure. This panel demonstrates the friendly associations of animal, bird, snake, and plant images David discusses.



One of the panels at the Great Gallery. The three large figures are larger than life size, about eight feet tall. These large figures are what David calls "spirit figures." Note the long tapered body design, lack of appendages, shoulder banding and vacant eyes on the left large figure. This figure also has snakes on both sides. These are common in this style. The middle and left large figures exhibit bilateral symmetry and vertical line motifs. Note the smaller figure on the top left that exhibits these traits even more. The right figure is interesting in that appears to be superimposed over an earlier Barrier Canyon figure. Note the head, shoulders, and body within the body of the larger figure.



This small Barrier Canyon figure is what David calls a "composite or hybrid figure." Note the bird feet, tail, sheep head, and snake tongue. A "helper figure" is on the figure's left hand. The sheep are about the size of a thumb nail.



This large Barrier Canyon "spirit" figure shows the vertical line motif, bilateral symmetry, the "crown" above the head (other white crowns are also visible in the left two figures from the Great Gallery above) and the quadruped.



The sensational Thompson Springs/Sego Canyon Barrier Canyon Style site. It is public, an easy drive, and always worth a visit.

Glen Canyon Style Rock Art

Much of the archeological remains of the Glen Canyon culture are now under the waters of Lake Powell. What we typically see in other locations in Utah is the oldest known version of this rock art style known as Glen Canyon Style 5 (GCS5).

GCS5 is easiest to recognize from its zoomorphic (animal) figures. They are often large, with wide rectangular bodies with square corners and extensive horizontal and vertical lines within the body. They are known colloquially amongst rock art people, who can remember old black and white TVs that operated over the air with a lot of banding in the picture, as “TV Sheep.”

GCS5 anthropomorphs (human) figures are less common but have a strange appearance with round or oval heads or masks, often with antennas, and the heads/masks are often bisected both horizontally and/or vertically. The bodies are often rectangular with interior lines.



The large sheep in the center is an example of a GCS5 Style zoomorph. It is surrounded by Anasazi Basketmaker style anthropomorphs (described later in this paper) some of which are superimposed over its legs. Superimposition is an important dating technique in rock art.



Two GCS5 anthropomorphs. The rock on which the top right figure was made has broken away, taking with it part of the figure. These figures have stick like bodies rather than the common rectangular shape.

Desert Archaic Style Rock Art

The Desert Archaic Style is an abstract form of rock art. It is found throughout much of the desert southwest. In Utah it is generally created in a curvilinear style composed of wavy lines. A rectilinear style with straight lines also exists. This style rarely includes representational figures and is usually pecked with wide lines.



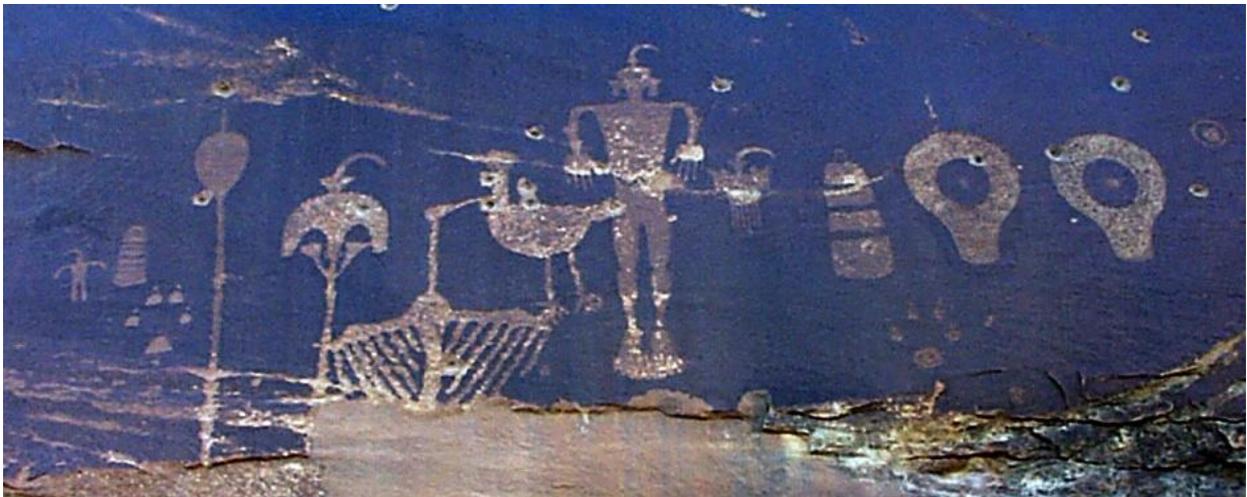
Two Desert Archaic Curvilinear Style panels on boulders in the Salt Lake City area.

Anasazi Basketmaker Style Rock Art

Anasazi rock art varies significantly across time. The earlier Basketmaker time period is quite different from the later Puebloan time period. Anthropomorphic Basketmaker figures are most commonly seen in the area of the San Juan River. These figures generally have round heads sometimes with hair bobs or tassels hanging down, long rectangular or slightly trapezoidal (wider at the shoulders than at the waist) bodies, and the arms, hands, legs, and feet hang straight down. This characteristic is often called “pendant” hands and feet. Figures are rarely solidly pecked. More often the figure is just outlined.



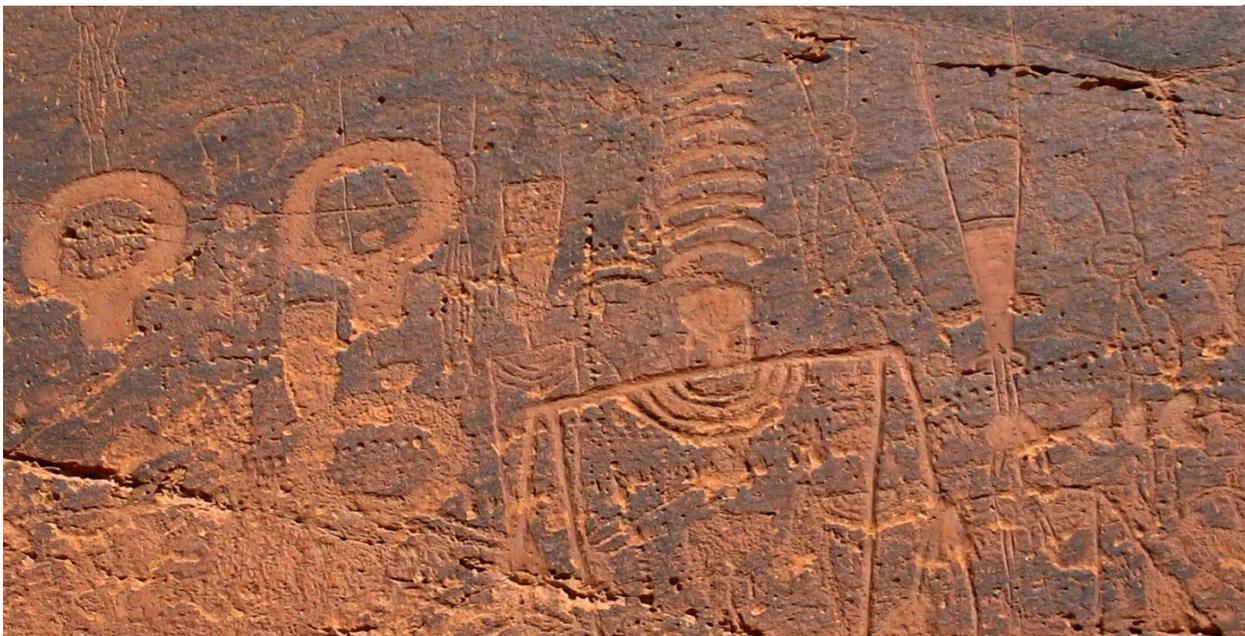
The left photo demonstrates a typical Anasazi Basketmaker style anthropomorph wearing a necklace. The right photo has two Anasazi Basketmaker style anthropomorphs. The left figure is typical of the style and has tassels on the shoulder and a fringed belt. The figure on the right is typical except for the giant bird for a head. These “duck head” figures seem to be limited to Basketmaker Style rock art.



This spectacular Anasazi Basketmaker panel has an anthropomorph with a round head, hair tassels, a headdress, and pendant hands and feet. It is unusual in the musculature of the legs and that it is solidly pecked. There are two birds and two plants in this panel. There are also two unusual segmented figures with handles on the top. These may be medicine bags. The twin lobed circles on the far right of the panel are another feature of Anasazi Basketmaker rock art.



This complicated Anasazi Basketmaker panel has anthropomorphs with unusual “disks” above the heads and extending out the ears.



This mostly Anasazi Basketmaker panel has layer upon layer of different rock art figures superimposed on each other. The anthropomorphic figure in the center has the unusual “disks” above the head. Note the twin lobed circles. There are also four Glen Canyon Style 5 (GCS5) anthropomorphs in this photo. The GCS5 anthropomorphs are older than the Basketmaker figures. We can see this in this panel because the Basketmaker rock art is superimposed over the GCS5 figures and the GCS5 figures are darker. This coloration demonstrates repatination which will be discussed in the dating section of this paper.

Anasazi Puebloan Style Rock Art

Anasazi Puebloan Style rock art is quite different from the earlier Basketmaker Style of rock art. Panels often feature more abstract elements and anthropomorphic figures are often simplified into “stick”

figures composed of simple lines and having upraised arms and lowered legs. Some people describe these simplified anthropomorphs as looking like a lizard. Other panels have long lines of anthropomorphs holding hands. These panels may be depicting ceremonial dances.



This panel appears to have figures from multiple time frames. The bright, wide figures are Anasazi Puebloan. They include abstract forms including possible abstract anthropomorphs and a zoomorphic (animal) figure. The darker figures that don't feature the same wide pecking style appear older due to repatination. Note the sheep on the right hand side of the panel with the rectangular body and interior lines. This appears to be Glen Canyon Style 5.



This Anasazi Puebloan style panel features a line of hand holding "dancers." Each figure has a triangular shaped body with a roundish head, hair tassels, and a single "feather" headdress. The panel also has bird, sheep, insect, animal tracks, and plant figures.

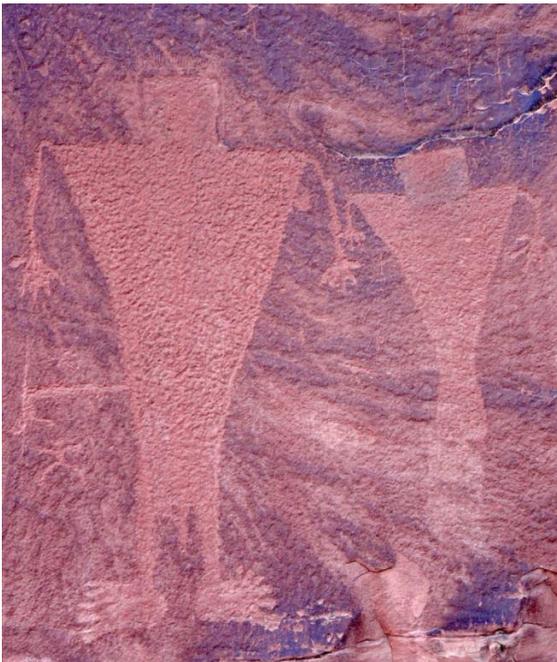


An example of a “stick” figure Anasazi Puebloan Style anthropomorph. It maintains the circular head, common in Anasazi rock art and the hair tassels.

Fremont Style Rock Art

The Fremont Style of rock art varies widely across the large area of the State which they occupied. For purposes of this paper the prototypical Vernal area anthropomorphic figures are described.

Fremont anthropomorphs often have a trapezoidal shaped body where the shoulders are wider than the waist. In fact, many images have a slight flare where the body is narrow at the waist and then widens slightly before the legs. Heads are often rectangular in what people call a “bucket” shape. The bodies often have elaborate decorations including necklaces and sashes. The heads often have elaborate headdresses and the arms are often disproportionately small.



The simple Fremont anthropomorphs on the left demonstrate the basic body forms: rectangular heads and trapezoidal bodies with a slight flare. The figure on the right shows the elaborate headdress, necklace, and waist sash. Note the “tear lines” by the eyes which is a less common feature of Fremont anthropomorphs.



This is the famous Three Kings panel at McConkie Ranch near Vernal. McConkie Ranch is a private ranch which allows public access to their wonderful rock art for a voluntary donation. Note the elaborate headdresses, elaborate body decoration, and flared bodies. The central figure has been pecked and then painted. It is holding an elaborate shield. To its right is a very unusual figure. Rather than having its body pecked out, it has the area outside of the body pecked. In modern artistic terms this technique is called Bas Relief and is VERY rare in Utah rock art. I'm sure someone has counted the six figures and wondered why the panel is called the Three Kings. We assume each figure is ½ of a king.



An interesting Fremont panel where each of the large anthropomorphs has a different style of dress. The bodies exhibit extreme flares. The heads are triangular rather than rectangular and have different headdresses. Note the "backpacker" figures near the bottom of the picture. Burden baskets have been found in archeological sites and panels with rows of "backpackers" can be found throughout the State.

Ute Style Rock Art

Ute Style rock art is difficult to describe. To be honest there may not be a single style description that fits well. This isn't to say that there isn't excellent Ute rock art. Some Ute panels are exquisite. Rather than describe a style we will describe elements used to identify Ute panels. All of the previously described cultural groups left the State prior to contact with Spanish explorers. So, a panel which includes a horse cannot be from any other cultural group with the exception of the Navajo or Paiute. The introduction of the horse had a tremendous impact on the Ute lifestyle. It increased their mobility. With the horse the Ute were able to come into contact with the Plains Indian cultures. From them the Ute seem to have developed a fascination with the buffalo. So, when we see a horse or buffalo in a rock

art panel we immediately think about the Ute culture. The Navajo also had access to the horse and included it in their panels but their rock art has a much smaller footprint within the State.

Historic themes also appear in Ute rock art. Cowboys, rifles, and furs are all evident in sites like Newspaper Rock State Park. At a different location a Ute chief went to Kansas City to sign a treaty and returned to Utah and created a rock art panel that described the train he rode on and the buildings he saw. The Ute also tried to mimic other styles of rock art. There are sites associated with previous cultural groups where the Utes seem to have added rock art that is similar in style to the rock art at that location.



Newspaper Rock State Park is a delightful example of a Ute rock art panel. Note the horses, cowboys, buffalo, and furs on the panel. The number of other elements are huge: rabbit tracks, bear paws, human footprints, sheep, deer, elk, circles that may represent medicine wheels, wagon wheels, or abstract figures. Note at the top center of the panel the darker Fremont anthropomorph showing repatination.

Paiute Style Rock Art

The Paiute moved into areas previously occupied by the Anasazi and began making their rock art in areas previously used by the Anasazi. Areas near St. George show some evidence of reworking of the old images. Most Paiute images are recognizable by their squatty anthropomorphic figures, wandering lines or "snakes", and rows of dots. There is evidence that Paiute images are still being made in this area and throughout the southern Great Basin. Panels with Anasazi rock art and a few Paiute images show continued use of the site through time.



Above: A typical Paiute panel



Left: A squat anthropomorphic figure with wandering lines or snakes.

Navajo Style Rock Art

Navajo rock art is relatively rare in Utah. It appears mostly in the southeastern part of the State. Navajo rock art includes figures of supernatural figures, horses, warriors, huge corn stalks, other plants, and animal figures. The style is quite different from anything else found in Utah. Warriors and supernatural figures often have dramatic feather depictions in the rock art.

We have some great photos of Navajo rock art from New Mexico, but few images from Utah. We'll leave you to discover this style on your own.

Dating Rock Art

Determining the age of rock art is not easy. Archeologists working on a dig have a broad variety of tools that they can use to date objects found within stratified layers. Let's say an archeologist finds a piece of pottery in the same layer as a fire where there are charcoal remains. While it might not be possible to directly date the pottery, if the charcoal can be dated it can be assumed that the pottery belongs to the same time frame due to its association in the same layer of the site.

Rock art researchers lack the same breadth of tools and can't generally use association to date rock art. Let's say that a rock art site is found at a site where there are three stratified layers of habitation. We don't know with which habitation layer the rock art is associated. In fact, the rock art might not be associated with any of the layers since it could have been done before or after the habitation occurred.

However, if a particular style of rock art is often associated with a particular type of archeological artifact, and not with artifacts of other archeologically known groups, then it can be assumed that the rock art style can be associated with the culture that produced the archeological artifacts. So, we can assume that Barrier Canyon Style rock art is associated with the Barrier Canyon culture because we see that rock art in association with artifacts we identify with that culture. This is helpful, but doesn't pin down when during the 8000 years that the Barrier Canyon people lived in Utah they created the rock art. Were a few sites created each generation or was there a hundred year period during which rock art became popular when it was all made?

Tools such as C_{14} dating can be used with organic components of pictographs (painted images) but not with petroglyphs (pecked images) which have no organic components. However, C_{14} dating is destructive, so widespread use is discouraged. C_{14} is often used in places where the surface has spalled off taking with it paint from an image. But even then the application of paint to sandstone (Utah's common form of rock) makes separation of organic materials, and therefore dating, difficult. There have been several C_{14} dates done on paint from the Great Gallery (see image on page 6). The dates are dramatically different. Is this because the figures were painted at different times or because our dating techniques are impractical for these images?

A new technique called Optically Stimulated Luminescence was recently used to date paint from the Great Gallery (see image on page 6) provided a date of between 0 A.D. and 1100 A.D.^{iv} If correct this would dramatically change our view of the age of Barrier Canyon Style rock art.

Portable mass spectrometers have been used to try and date pecked sites. This technique is even more complicated and results are problematic.

Needless to say, techniques for absolute dating of rock art are in flux and the precise creation date of most rock art is difficult to determine. As a result, most rock art researchers use relative dating techniques such as superimposition, repatination, and date specific elements. Relative dating doesn't provide an absolute date. Rather, it is a method for saying that one figure is older than another. But we don't know if the older figure was made a day or 1000 years before the younger figure.

Superimposition occurs when one rock art figure is created over another existing figure. (See the image of the GCS5 figure on page 8.) That means the top figure is “newer” than the bottom figure. How much newer is open to debate.

Repatination is the tendency for rock faces to develop an oxide covering that is a different color from the underlying rock. (See images on pages 10 and 12 where areas of the rock surface have fallen off the bottom of the panels to show the underlying rock color.) Pecked rock art cuts through this patina and into the underlying rock surface. Over time the patina re-develops and the rock art becomes darker as it is covered with the new patina. So, darker rock art is older than lighter rock art on the same panel. This technique only applies to the same rock surface facing the same direction. There are boulders where rock art figures cover multiple faces of the boulder. One side is heavily repatinated, while the other part of the rock art figure is not repatinated because it has a different exposure to prevailing weather.

Date specific elements refer to rock art elements that can be dated to specific times. For example, if one can be confident that an image represents a mammoth then we can say: “this image must date before the time that mammoths became extinct.” Likewise, if we see an image of a bow we can determine that this image must have been created after the bow was introduced to the Utah area. Bows and horses are common elements in rock art that we can use as date specific elements.

Conclusion

Utah is a great place for rock art. The people who lived here left a lot of pecked and painted images and our climate has preserved many of these sites. This paper provides a brief overview of the thousands of images created over many thousands of years. If you are interested in learning more about Utah rock art consider joining the Utah Rock Art Research Association. You will meet people with the same interests, have the opportunity to attend monthly field trips to rock art sites, and attend an annual conference with great speakers and even more field trips.

Authors and Use of the Material

This paper was written by Troy Scotter and Nina Bowen. All photos are from Troy Scotter except for the Paiute images which are from Nina Bowen. The text and photos may be used for non-commercial purposes provided that attribution to the authors is made. Photos have been edited for contrast and brightness in order to make the rock art elements more visible.

ⁱ Personal correspondence with Arie Leeflang at the Utah State History Preservation Office; March 8, 2017.

ⁱⁱ Benn Pikyavit speaking at a Utah Rock Art Research Association symposium in 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ancient Painters Of The Colorado Plateau: Part Two – Barrier Canyon Style Form Motifs; David Sucec; http://www.bcsproject.org/A_PRESENTATIONS/AncientPainters2.pdf

^{iv} Age of Barrier Canyon-style rock art constrained by cross-cutting relations and luminescence dating techniques; Joel Pederson; Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America; volume 111.